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PUBLIC PROVISION

FOR

PAUPER IDIOTS AND IMBECILES

IN

ENGLAND AND WALES.

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Public Provision for Pauper Idiots and Imbeciles in England and Wales.*

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My apology for bringing forward this subject at the present time is that considerable interest with regard to it has recently been evidenced by correspondence and comments in the medical journals, as well as by inquiries set on foot by the Lunacy Commissioners and the Local Government Board. The former have published in their 49th Annual Report, just issued, a "Return showing the Number of Pauper Idiot, Imbecile, and Epileptic Children in the Asylums, etc., on 1st September, 1894,"† and a return of similar character as to such children in workhouses has been issued by the latter. The upshot of the whole matter is that, according to these returns, there are in lunatic asylums 525 children of this class (335 males, 190 females), and in workhouses 485 (281 males, 204 females). The latter number includes, however, 93 children returned as "epileptic only," so that of idiots and imbeciles in workhouses under 16 years of age there are but 392. Adding together those in lunatic asylums and in workhouses we find that a total of 917 youthful idiots and imbeciles are provided for by the Poor Law in these institutions. The Local Government Board return, however, gives us no information as to the large number of such children living with poor parents who receive on their behalf some parochial relief. In the Commissioners' return the children are classified as *idiots* and *imbeciles* respectively, 399 in the former, 126 in the latter class; and 154 are said to be in the opinion of the medical officers likely to be improved by

* Read at the Annual Meeting of the Medico-Psychological Association, 1895.

† 49th Report Commissioners in Lunacy, App. N., p. 390 *seq.* "Imbecile and Epileptic Children in Workhouses." Local Government Board Return, Feb., 1895.

special training. In the Local Government Board return the children are classified as "imbecile only," "epileptic only," and "both imbecile and epileptic;" and the number of children who, in the opinion of their medical officers, would be likely to be improved by special training is set down as 178. Consequently if we are guided solely by these returns we should be led to the conclusion that in England and Wales—excluding the Metropolitan district, for which separate arrangements exist—there are no more than 332 *improvable* pauper idiots and imbeciles under 16 years of age remaining to be provided for in addition to the 225 paupers already accommodated in voluntary institutions for the training of imbecile children. Indeed, deducting 52 now resident in the special idiot block of the Northampton County Asylum, there remain but 280, a number insufficient to fill a decent-sized special institution!

The above figures, as has been already stated, deal solely with the extra-Metropolitan area. Within the Metropolitan district, under the provisions of what is known as the Gathorne-Hardy Act, special arrangements for the training and education of youthful imbeciles and idiots have been made since the year 1873. In that year about 100 children, previously mingled with the adult imbeciles at Leavesden Asylum, were separated, and formed the nucleus (at Hampstead) of what afterwards became the Metropolitan Asylum District Schools for Imbecile Children. The early estimate of the Managers was that a school building capable of providing for the training and education of from 300 to 400 children would be adequate to the needs of the Metropolis, and ultimately plans for a school at Darenth capable of accommodating 500 children were approved. On the 1st January, 1895, no less than 956 children were actually under care at that institution, which has had to be repeatedly enlarged.

Assuming that the prevalence of congenital mental defect is not greater in the Metropolitan than in the Provincial districts, and that the number of pauper idiots and imbeciles bears in each case a similar ratio to the pauper population generally, we may conclude that at least five times as much accommodation is required for provincial imbecile children as for those of the Metropolis.* There would, therefore,

* In 1894 the number of paupers in the County of London was 122,843; for the rest of England and Wales 699,078. In 1891 the general population of the County of London was 4,211,743, of the rest of the country 24,790,782. The census of 1891 gives no trustworthy information as to the number of juvenile idiots and imbeciles in the general population or in the several counties.

seem to be need of five pauper schools for imbeciles as large as Darenth, or (what would be better) of ten institutions, each for 500 patients, distributed in convenient provincial centres. The Metropolitan Schools for Imbeciles having now been in operation for twenty-two years, very much to the satisfaction not only of the Managers but of the ratepayers generally, there would appear to be no need of argument in favour of the example being extensively followed throughout the country. The local authorities possess at the present time, under Section 241 of the Lunacy Act, 1890, ample power to provide separate asylums for idiots, but this clause being permissive only, has not as yet been acted upon. The initial difficulty seems to be the arrangement of suitable districts by combination of local authorities for such a purpose. Assuming the ultimate demand for accommodation to be equivalent to that experienced in the Metropolitan area, viz., in the proportion of about 8 beds per 1,000 paupers, Lancaster is the only county requiring an institution for 500 and upwards to itself. With a pauper population of 78,947 (out of a general population of nearly 4,000,000) an asylum for from five to six hundred children would no doubt soon be filled, and the abstraction of this unwelcome element from the masses of lunatics congregated in the county asylums and workhouses would be a distinct relief to both classes of institutions. In that county the Royal Albert Asylum—a charitable foundation—has during the last quarter of a century demonstrated the utility of special training, and we find Boards of Guardians, who have been in the habit of visiting it, putting pressure upon the Asylums Board to establish a county institution for pauper imbecile children. The pauper population of the three Ridings of Yorkshire falls little short of that of Lancashire, and a Yorkshire institution for 500 children would probably not exceed the demand for accommodation. With regard to other counties, combined groupings would be necessary in order to provide a sufficient number of inmates to fill an institution for 500, a number which would have its advantages both as regards classification and economical management.

Some such comprehensive scheme would theoretically be the best, but as practical difficulties are apt to arise in the administrative arrangements of combined authorities, it may be well to suggest an alternative. Provision for various portions of England and Wales might be made, as has been done in the County of Northampton, by some of the more

enterprising County Councils establishing, in connection with their lunatic asylums, separate departments for idiots, large enough to receive also out-county patients. This would probably not be an unprofitable experiment; and if, as is perhaps likely, the ultimate result should be to lead to the establishment of larger combined institutions, the buildings would be available at a later date for ordinary asylum purposes.

A third plan has been proposed, viz., to make provision for pauper idiots in connection with the existing voluntary training institutions by arrangement with their managers. In the county of Lancaster it has indeed been suggested that the Royal Albert Asylum—which at present receives a limited number of paupers—should be subsidised by the county authorities and utilised for the training of improvable pauper idiots, those found unimprovable after a period of probation being relegated to the county asylums. The county would thus be saved the expense of providing the expensive educational equipment of a training institution. If a similar plan were adopted for the Home Counties in connection with Earlswood (which, though not receiving paupers, has space for at least 100 more patients than its funds permit it to maintain), and for the Eastern and Midland Counties in connection with the institutions at Colchester and Knowle, the pressing demands of these districts might be met in the same way as those of the Western Counties are by the training institution at Starcross, which, although a charitable foundation, throws open its doors to improvable pauper cases, duly paid for by Boards of Guardians. Such an arrangement might indeed tend to these institutions becoming, even more than they are now, *educational* establishments, leaving to the local authorities to provide the necessary custodial asylums for those incapable of education, and industrial homes for those who, having passed through training, still need supervision.

I was unaware, when collecting material for this paper, that the Lunacy Commissioners were about to publish the return already referred to, or I should not have troubled the Medical Superintendents of County and Borough Asylums with a personal inquiry as to the number of idiot and imbecile children under their charge. I take this opportunity of thanking my colleagues for their kind courtesy in filling up and returning my schedules; and it may be interesting to state that the latter, which included cases up to

20 years of age (because, in my experience, retarded intellects may benefit, especially by industrial training, up to that age), show an increase of nearly 40 per cent. upon the figures of the Commissioners, founded upon the statistics of those under 16 years of age. This probably points to one result of the neglected education of imbecile children being to compel the admission of a large number to the lunatic asylums between 16 and 20 years of age.

It is noteworthy that of the 525 children reported by the Commissioners, no less than 280 were epileptic and 340 of dirty habits. Of the 392 imbecile children in workhouses, 98 were epileptic, or 25 per cent. against 53 per cent. in the asylum list. Twenty-nine per cent. of the asylum cases and 36 per cent. of the workhouse cases (including those "epileptic only") are returned by the medical officers as likely to be improved by special training. It is evident that if comprehensive provision for all these cases should be undertaken by the counties, the arrangements need not be of an elaborate character. On this subject I quote with approval some judicious remarks from the report for 1892 of the Medical Superintendent of the Middlesex County Asylum. Says Dr. Gardiner Hill: "The permanent good results that have been achieved by existing establishments in the education of idiots, though considerable, are not encouraging enough for me to recommend that a *very costly and elaborate* system be attempted with the object of obtaining a high standard of education, and with the hope that the idiots may be made sufficiently self-reliant as to be able on their own resources to earn their living; but I do consider that buildings and an adequate staff, such as you propose, ought to be provided to give them an elementary education, to teach them to attend to their daily wants and to employ themselves usefully, so that they may have pleasure in feeling they have some share in the common objects of life." It is satisfactory to find that the County Council of Middlesex has determined to erect at Wandsworth, near their lunatic asylum, a detached building for 100 idiots of each sex; and this is another testimony in favour of the example of special training set by the Metropolitan district being followed in the counties.

There is no need at the present time to discuss the necessity of separating idiot children from the adult insane or imbecile inmates of lunatic asylums and workhouses, for that is universally acknowledged; and in their last Report

the Lunacy Commissioners allude to such association as an "undoubted evil." As Dr. Gardiner Hill remarks, "An ordinary County Asylum cannot be expected to answer the double purpose of a hospital for the treatment of mental disease and of an institution for the keeping and training of imbeciles." The principles applicable to the one class and the other indeed differ so widely that there is no doubt that an entirely separate administration would be most effective, and on this account the scheme most to be commended is that of county institutions for the training of idiots and imbeciles entirely separate from the county lunatic asylums. But failing this, the establishment of distinct departments for such children in connection with the county lunatic asylums is a step in the right direction, and such a plan works satisfactorily at Northampton, and is to be followed in the counties of Middlesex and Hampshire. Finally, the idea of thoroughly utilising the educational resources of existing voluntary institutions for the training not only of charitable cases, but also of improvable pauper imbecile children paid for by Boards of Guardians, appears to me one worthy of consideration, especially at the present time; when the education of mentally deficient as well as of other abnormal children seems likely to become a matter of national concern.

